Chapter 1

What Is Windows Vista?

In This Chapter

- Getting to know Windows Vista
- Introducing the new features in Windows Vista
- Understanding how Windows Vista affects your old programs
- Figuring out whether your PC is powerful enough to run Windows Vista
- Knowing which version of Windows Vista you need

Chances are, you've probably heard about Windows: the boxes and windows and mouse pointer that greet you whenever you turn on your computer. In fact, millions of people all over the world are puzzling over it as you read this book. Almost every new computer sold today comes with a copy of Windows preinstalled — cheerfully greeting you when first turned on.

This chapter helps you understand why Windows lives inside your computer and introduces Microsoft's latest Windows version, called *Windows Vista.* It explains how Windows Vista differs from previous Windows versions, whether you should upgrade to Vista, and how well your faithful old PC will weather the upgrade.

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What Is Windows Vista, and Why Are You Using It?

Created and sold by a company called Microsoft, Windows isn't like your usual software that lets you write term papers or send angry e-mails to mail-order companies. No, Windows is an *operating system,* meaning it controls the way you work with your computer. It's been around for more than 20 years, and the latest whiz-bang version is called *Windows Vista.*

Windows gets its name from all the cute little windows it places on your monitor. Each window shows information, such as a picture, a program that you're running, or a baffling technical reprimand. You can put several windows on-screen at the same time and jump from window to window, visiting different programs. You can also enlarge a window to fill the entire screen.

Like the mother with the whistle in the lunch court, Windows controls every window and each part of your computer. When you turn on your computer, Windows jumps onto the screen and supervises any running programs. Throughout all this action, Windows keeps things running smoothly, even if the programs start throwing food at each other.

In addition to controlling your computer and bossing around your programs, Windows Vista comes with a bunch of free programs. Although your computer can run without these programs, they're nice to have. These programs let you do different things, like write and print letters, browse the Internet, play music, and even whittle down your camcorder's vacation footage into a three-minute short — automatically.

And why are you using Windows Vista? If you're like most people, you didn't have much choice. Nearly every computer sold since early 2007 comes with Windows Vista preinstalled. A few people escaped Windows by buying Apple computers (those nicer-looking computers that cost more). But chances are, you, your neighbors, your boss, your kids at school, and millions of other people around the world are using Windows.

- Microsoft took pains (and several years of work) to make Windows Vista the most secure version of Windows yet. (Just ask people who upgraded from previous versions.)
- Windows makes it easy for several people to share a single computer. Each person receives his or her own user account. When users click their name at the Windows opening screen, they see their *own* work — just the way they left it. Vista adds new controls for parents to limit how their kids use the PC, as well as how much of the Internet they can view.
- A new, automated version of Backup makes it easier to do what you should have been doing all along: Make copies of your important files every night. (Vista Home includes the Backup program, but it's not automatic: You must remember to run the program each night.)
- Finally, Vista's powerful new search program means that you can forget about where you stored your files. Just click the Start menu and type what that file contained: a few words in a document, the name of the band singing the song, or even the date you took that picture of Kelly at the office party.

Yes, Microsoft is sneaky

Microsoft may tout Windows as your helpful computing companion, always keeping your best interests in mind, but that's not really true. Windows always keeps *Microsoft's* interests in mind. You'll find that out as soon as you call Microsoft for help on making Windows work right. Your first two questions are free if you pick up the long distance charges to Redmond, Washington. The third call (and all the rest) cost $35 a piece, but prices may change at any time.

Microsoft also uses Windows to plug its own products and services. Sometimes you click a menu item that touts something helpful, but Windows simply leads you to a Web site where you can purchase additional items from Microsoft or its business partners. For example, the Start menu, normally your launch pad for programs, sports an entry for Windows Marketplace. The Order Prints option in Windows Photo Gallery doesn't let you enter your own favorite print shop; it just lists printers who've partnered with Microsoft.

Simply put, Windows not only controls your computer, but also serves as a huge Microsoft advertising vehicle. Take Microsoft's advertising flyers with the traditional grain of salt.

Should I Bother Switching to Windows Vista?

Microsoft releases a new version of Windows every few years. If you bought your PC between 2001 and 2006, you've probably grown accustomed to the mechanics of Windows XP. That leaves the nagging question, why bother upgrading to Windows Vista when Windows XP works just fine?

Actually, if Windows XP's running just fine, then you probably won't need Windows Vista. But Microsoft hopes the following improvements in Vista will push your hand toward your credit card.

Improved security

Windows Vista's tougher new exterior helps make it more difficult for evil programs to louse up your PC. For example, Vista's built-in Windows Defender program constantly searches your PC for any *spyware* — small programs that spy on your activities, often showing you pop-up ads and slowing down your PC in the process. Microsoft constantly trains Windows

Defender, shown in Figure 1-1, to recognize and squash the newest breeds of spyware.

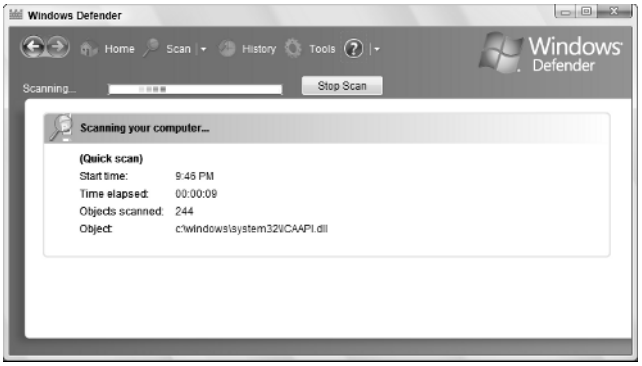

Figure 1-1: Windows Vista comes with Windows Defender, a free spyware eradicator that Microsoft automatically updates to recognize the latest breeds of spyware.

The other parts of Vista's security regime aren't as simple, unfortunately. See, PCs recognize programs as mere strings of numbers, and they can't tell a good string — a word processor, for example — from a bad string, such as a virus. To solve the identification problem, Vista simply dumps the decision onto *your* shoulders: Whenever a particularly powerful program tries to run on your PC, Vista states, "Windows needs your permission to run this program." Then it leaves you with two choices: Allow or Cancel.

To ease you through this admittedly difficult new responsibility, I cover Vista's new security features in Chapter 10.

And although Windows Defender keeps you covered from spyware, Vista doesn't include a free antivirus program. Instead, Microsoft invites you to subscribe to its new Live OneCare antivirus program (`www.windowsonecare.com`) for $49 dollars a year.

New Internet Explorer version

Vista's new Internet Explorer 7 (which I cover in Chapter 8) lets you surf the Web more easily and securely with the following new features:

- **Tabbed browsing:** In the past, keeping two Web sites open on-screen meant running *two* copies of Internet Explorer. With Vista, Internet Explorer displays several Web sites simultaneously, each running in a separate page with a clickable tab at the top for easy switching. That tab makes it easier to compare prices from several different shopping sites, for example, or read one Web site while others load in the background. You can even save a group of Web sites as your home page: Whenever you load Internet Explorer, your favorite sites will already be waiting for you, each living in its own tab.
- **Phishing filter:** An evil new industry called *phishing* sends e-mails that pretend to be from finance-related companies, such as banks, PayPal, eBay, and others. The realistic-looking e-mails pretend to alert you to some security problem as they try to trick you into entering your name and precious password. Internet Explorer's new Phishing Filter, shown in Figure 1-2, sniffs out the phishing Web sites before you enter your information, keeping your name and password safe.
- **Built-in Search box:** Tired of racing off to Google to find a Web site? The top of Internet Explorer 7 sports a tiny Search box for on-the-fly searches. Although it's programmed to search on Microsoft's own MSN search, Chapter 8 shows you how to make it search Google, instead.
- **RSS feeds:** Short for Really Simple Syndication, this feature lets you see headlines from your favorite Web sites in a short drop-down box. By ogling the RSS box, you can catch up on the latest news headlines, for example, without stopping to visit your favorite news site. RSS feeds also let you know if your favorite sites have any new articles, sparing you a wasted visit. RSS feeds speed up your browsing and, conveniently, leave out the ads.

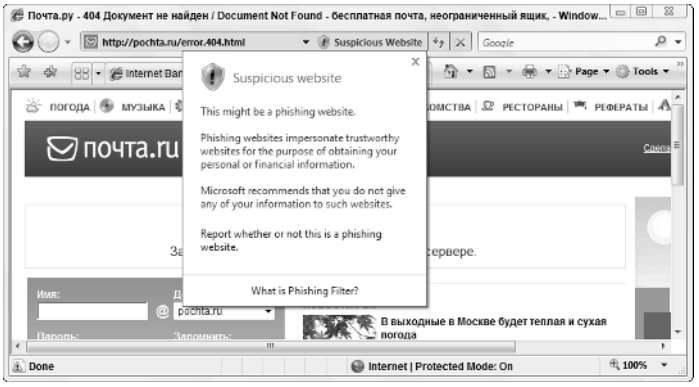
Suspicious website
This might be a phishing website.
Phishing websites impersonate trustworthy websites for the purpose of obtaining your personal or financial information.
Microsoft recommends that you do not give any of your information to such websites.
Report whether or not this is a phishing website.
What is Phishing Filter?
почта.ru
Done
Internet | Protected Mode: On

Figure 1-2: Internet Explorer's new Phishing Filter alerts you to fake Web sites that try to trick you into entering your name, password, or credit-card information.

New Media Player and Media Center

Vista's new version of Media Player sports streamlined, easier-to-use controls. The big star, however, is Vista's Media Center, which not only plays DVDs and music but lets you watch TV on your PC and even record shows onto your hard drive for later viewing.

Recording TV shows requires two important things, however: a TV tuner in your PC and the proper version of Vista. (Vista comes in a startling *five* versions, all described at this chapter's end.) Installing a TV tuner can be as simple as plugging a box into your PC's USB port or sliding a card inside your PC. I describe both tasks in one of my other books, *Upgrading and Fixing PCs For Dummies,* published by Wiley Publishing, Inc.

DVD burning

More than five years after DVD burners hit the market, Windows can finally take advantage of them without third-party software. Windows Vista lets you copy files and movies to DVDs as well as CDs.

In fact, Vista's updated version of Movie Maker (described in Chapter 16) lets you turn your camcorder footage into DVDs that play back on a normal DVD player and TV. Mail them to your friends and prepare for a deluge of incoming vacation DVDs, as well.

Calendar

For the first time, Windows now sports a calendar, shown in Figure 1-3, for keeping track of your appointments. You can even publish your calendar to other PCs or Web sites, keeping your appointments synchronized with the calendars of your friends and coworkers.

Easier searching for files

Windows XP really drags its feet when searching for files. Searching for a filename takes several minutes on a crowded hard drive, and if you're searching your files for a particular word or phrase, you're in for a long weekend. Vista, by contrast, spends its idle time fine-tuning an index of every word on your hard drive.

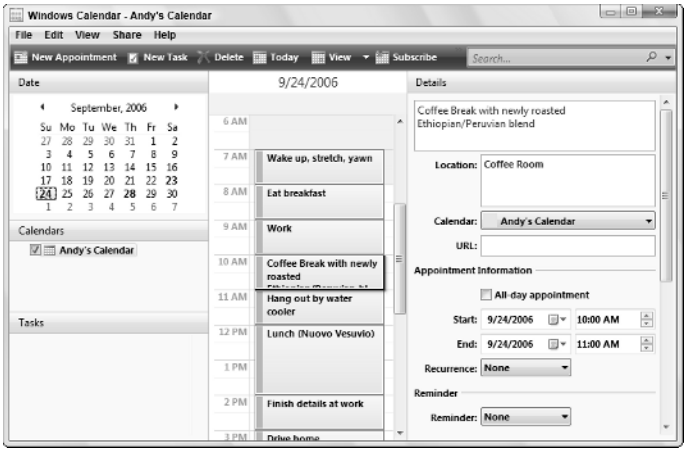

Figure 1-3: The built-in Calendar program in Vista tracks your tasks and appointments, as well as synchronizes your calendar with others to coordinate meetings.

Instead of sending you on a constant search for your files, Vista automatically remembers your files' locations. For example, search for every document mentioning "Celery," and Vista instantly lists those files' names, ready for opening with a double-click. Whenever you create new documents mentioning "Celery," Vista automatically remembers their locations, too, making for quick and easy retrieval.

Vista places a Search box on the Start menu, atop every folder, in the Help and Support window, and in a few other key spots. The handy Search box and Vista's up-to-date index make it faster than ever to find the files and programs you want.

Vista even updates its index with words on Web sites you've visited recently, letting you quickly reread that headline you scrolled through last week.

I explain how to put the Search box to work in Chapter 6.

Vista looks prettier

Microsoft spent some time decorating Vista with a three-dimensional look, a treat available only to PCs with powerful graphics capabilities. When you can't find an open window, for example, press the Windows and Tab keys: All the windows appear on your PC in a Flip 3D view, shown in Figure 1-4.

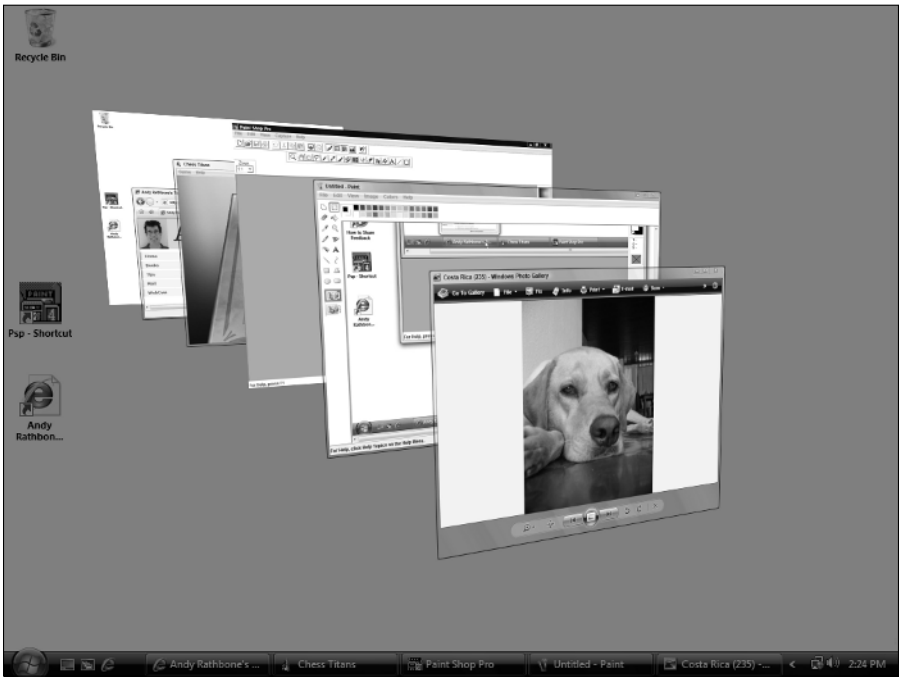

Figure 1-4: To see a 3D view of your currently open windows, press Tab while holding down the Windows key. Press Tab or spin your mouse's scroll wheel to flip through the windows and then let go of the Windows key when your window is on top.

Hover your mouse pointer over any name listed on your desktop's taskbar, and Vista displays a thumbnail picture of that window's current contents, making your window much easier to retrieve from the sea of programs.

Can My PC Still Run Vista?

If your PC already runs Windows XP well, it will probably run Vista, but not at its best. However, upgrading your PC with a few things will help Vista run better, a job I tackle in *Upgrading and Fixing PCs For Dummies,* 7th edition. Here's the shopping list:

- **Video:** Vista requires powerful graphics for its fanciest 3D features, such as Flip 3D (see Figure 1-4). Upgraded video cards can cost more than $100, and they're not available for laptops. But if your PC's video lacks the muscle and your wallet lacks the cash, don't despair. Vista simply slips into more casual clothes, letting your PC run without the 3D views.

- **Memory:** Vista loves memory. For best results, your PC should have 1GB of memory or more. Memory's easy to install and relatively cheap, so don't skimp here.
- **DVD drive:** Unlike Windows XP, which comes on a CD, Windows Vista comes on a *DVD.* That means your PC needs a working DVD drive to install it. That probably won't rule out many PCs these days, but it may rule out some older laptops.

Windows Vista should be able to run most of your current programs without problems. Some, however, won't work, including most security-based programs, such as antivirus, firewall, and security programs. You'll need to contact the program's manufacturer to see whether it'll give you a free upgrade.

Shopping for a new PC to run Vista? Visit any store, and you'll find plenty of PCs running Vista. To see how well a particular PC handles Vista, click the Start button, choose Control Panel, and open the System and Maintenance category. There, select Performance Information and Tools. Vista displays that particular PC's Windows Experience Index, which ranges from 1 (dismal) to 5 (excellent).

Not sure what version of Windows your PC has? Right-click Computer from the Start menu and choose Properties. That screen states your Windows version.

Can I Make Windows Vista Look and Feel Like Windows XP?

Some people crave Vista's new interface; others feel like they're looking at a rental car's unfamiliar dashboard. Follow these steps to make Vista look *almost* like Windows XP:

1. **Start by changing the Start menu: Right-click the Start button, choose Properties, select Classic Start Menu, and click OK.**
2. **Next, bring back the desktop: Right-click a blank part of the desktop and choose Personalize. Choose Theme and then choose Windows Classic from the Theme pull-down menu. Click OK.**
3. **Finally, put the menus back on top of each folder: Open your Documents folder from the Start menu. Then click the Organize button, choose Folder and Search Options, and choose Use Windows Classic Folders. Click OK.**

These steps not only bring back the look of previous Windows versions, but speed up an older PC that's struggling to keep up with Vista's fancy layers of graphics.

The Five Flavors of Vista

Windows XP came in two easy-to-understand versions: One for home, and one for business. Microsoft confuses things in Vista by splitting it into five different versions, each with a different price tag.

Luckily, only three versions are aimed at consumers, and most people will probably choose Windows Vista Home Premium. Still, to clear up the confusion, I describe all five versions in Table 1-1.

Table 1-1: The Five Flavors of Windows Vista

The Version of Vista	*What It Does*
Windows Vista Home Basic	Reminiscent of Windows XP Home Edition, this version leaves out Vista's fancier media features, such as DVD burning, HDTV, TV recording, and other similar features.
Windows Vista Home Premium	This version is Windows Vista Home Basic, but with the media features tossed back in. It targets people who watch TV on their PC or who want to create DVDs from their camcorder footage.
Windows Vista Business	Just as with its brethren, Windows XP Professional, this aims at the business market. It includes a fax program, for example, but lacks the media-related features found in Vista Home Premium.
Windows Vista Enterprise	This business market version contains even more tools, such as support for additional languages and larger networks.
Windows Vista Ultimate	A combination of the Home and Business versions, this version aims at the wallets of hard-core PC users, such as gamers, people in the video industry, and similar people who spend their lives in front of their keyboards.

Although five versions may seem complicated, choosing the one you need isn't that difficult. And because Microsoft stuffed all the versions on your Vista DVD, you can upgrade at any time simply by whipping out the credit card and unlocking the features in a different version. Here are some guidelines for choosing the version you need:

- If your PC can't display or record TV shows, and you don't want to make DVDs from your camcorder footage, then save a few bucks by sticking with **Windows Vista Home Basic.** It's fine for word processing, e-mail, and the Internet.
- If you want to burn DVDs and/or record TV shows on your PC, then pony up the cash for **Windows Vista Home Premium.**
- People who run Web servers on their PCs — and you'll know if you're doing it — will want **Windows Vista Business.**
- Dedicated gamers and computer industry professionals will want **Windows Vista Ultimate** because it includes *everything* found in the other versions.
- Computer techies who work for businesses will argue with their bosses over whether they need **Windows Business** or **Windows Enterprise** versions. They'll make their decision based on whether they're a small company (Windows Business) or a large company (Windows Enterprise).

That inexpensive **Vista Starter** version you may have heard about isn't sold in the United States. It's sold at reduced prices in developing nations like Malaysia. (It's not really a goodwill gesture as much as it's an attempt to reduce software piracy.)

Vista's Service Pack 1

Whenever a problem pops up in Windows Vista, Microsoft releases a small piece of software called a *patch* for a quick fix. After a long year of patches, Microsoft rolled them all into one megapatch called a *Service Pack*.

Vista's Service Pack 1, automatically delivered and installed on your PC by Windows Update, doesn't change the way Vista works on the surface. But when the service pack arrived on your PC in early 2008, it made Vista run more smoothly under the hood. After Service Pack 1 is installed, the words Service Pack 1 appear in Vista's System window, shown in the following figure. To see whether your PC has Service Pack 1 installed, click the Start menu, right-click Computer, choose Properties, and then look for the words Service Pack 1 as shown.

For more information about Windows Update and its automatic downloading of patches, visit Chapter 10.

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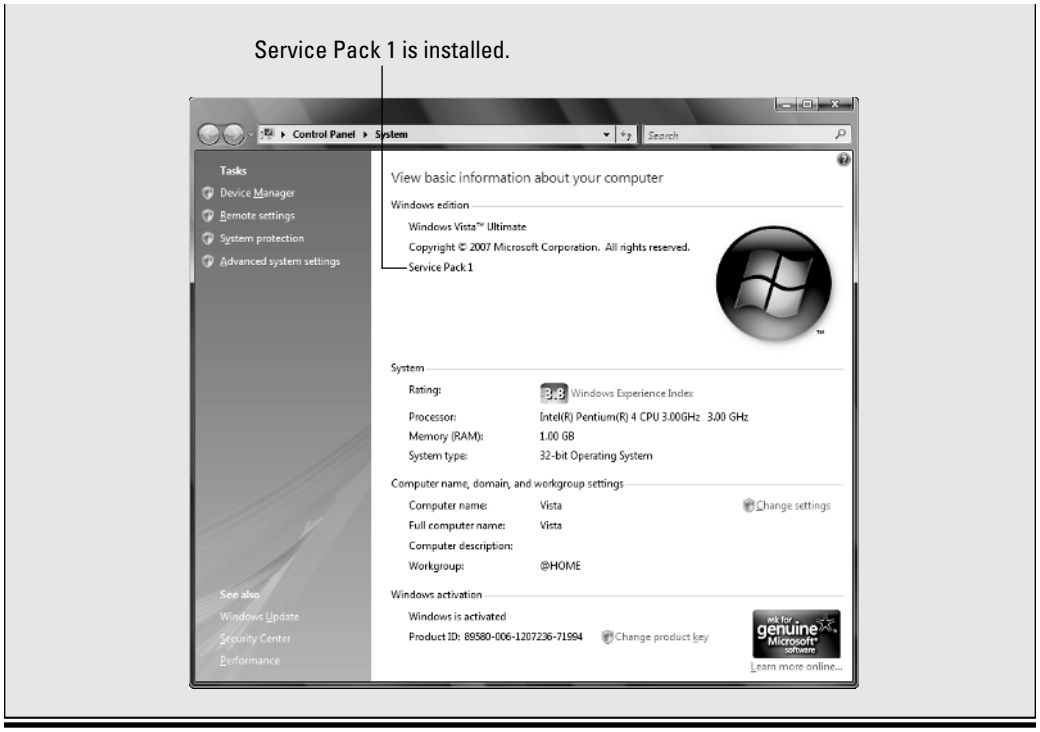
Service Pack 1 is installed.
Control Panel ▸ System
Search
Tasks
Device Manager
Remote settings
System protection
Advanced system settings
View basic information about your computer
Windows edition
Windows Vista™ Ultimate
Copyright © 2007 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
Service Pack 1
System
Rating:
3.8 Windows Experience Index
Processor: Intel(R) Pentium(R) 4 CPU 3.00GHz 3.00 GHz
Memory (RAM): 1.00 GB
System type: 32-bit Operating System
Computer name, domain, and workgroup settings
Computer name: Vista
Change settings
Full computer name: Vista
Computer description:
Workgroup: @HOME
Windows activation
Windows is activated
Product ID: 89580-006-1207236-71994
Change product key
ask for genuine Microsoft software
Learn more online...
See also
Windows Update
Security Center
Performance